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Blessed

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

What does it mean to be blessed?

In common usage, “blessed” refers both to a situation and a feeling — a situation of some abundant earthly gain as well as the resulting feeling of happiness. In ancient Greek times, to be blessed meant to enjoy a life free from daily cares or worries. It was a condition reserved for the wealthy and powerful.¹ In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (LW 21), Luther wrote that the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day defined “blessed” as being successful, rich and powerful. He warned his readers, “This is still what the world believes today.”² In our day as well, a blessed life is understood to be a life filled with good things — earthly prosperity and happiness. The questions “Am I blessed?” and “Am I wealthy?” and “Am I happy?” are inextricably linked.

But if being happy is all that blessed means, we are quickly frustrated. Happiness is elusive. The root word of “happy”

is “hap,” the Middle English word for “luck.” Other words from this root include “happen,” “happenstance” and “haphazard.” Happiness, in the world’s experience, is largely a matter of chance. It depends on the roll of the dice. Blessedness, when it is dependent on happenstance, rises and falls haphazardly.

1. What are the spiritual dangers of understanding “blessed” solely in terms of happiness?
2. When someone says to you, “I am so blessed,” to what kinds of things are they usually referring? Who is credited with the blessing?
3. If a fellow pastor says “We are so blessed!” in reference to his church, what things might he be referring to?

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Understanding “blessed” in the Scriptures is complicated by the fact that “blessed” translates as multiple words in Hebrew and Greek.³

something nice about someone; He is actually bestowing and enabling His good gifts. God is always the source of this blessing, though it is sometimes pronounced through a human agent.

The same Hebrew word also means to bend the knee, as when paying homage or receiving a blessing. *Berakah*, therefore, can refer to man’s action of praise to God. Having received God’s blessing, man responds by blessing (praising and thanking) God. For example, in Gen. 9:1, God blessed Noah and his sons, to which Noah responds in Gen. 9:26 by blessing God with praise and thanksgiving.

Divine Service, Setting Three closes with both uses of this word. Based on Ps. 103:1, we say, “Bless (*barak*) we the Lord,” which means, “Thanks be to God.” This is followed by the Aaronic benediction of Num. 6:24–26, “The Lord bless (*barak*) you.”

1. What divine gift or enablement is bestowed by God with the word “blessed” (*barak*) in the following passages?
 - › Gen. 12:1–3
 - › Job 42:12–13
 - › Is. 61:8–10
 - › Num. 6:23–27

“Blessed” in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the words בָּרַךְ (*barak*) and אָשַׁרְתָּ (*ashre*) are both commonly translated as “blessed,” but the concepts are distinct from one another.

Barak

The first time “blessed” appears in the Bible is on the fifth day of creation, Gen. 1:22: “And God blessed (*berakah*) them [the fish and birds], saying, “Be fruitful and multiply...” A day later, man is blessed by God to be fruitful, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it. Here, “blessed” means to confer abundant and effective life. To be blessed is to be divinely enabled. God is doing more than just saying

1 Gerhard Kittel, ed., and G.W. Bromiley, trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.4 (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1967), 362.

2 J.J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21: *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), Libronix edition, commentary on Matt 5:3.

3 John Pfeiffer provides an excellent resource for understanding the Hebrew and Greek background of “blessed” in the article “Blest or Blessed?” *Journal of Theology* 53, nos. 3 and 4 (2013), clclutheran.org/online-library.

Ashre

The other Old Testament word often translated as “blessed” is *ashre*, the plural construct of *asher*, which is defined as “go straight,” “pronounce happy,” “call blessed.” One who is *ashre* is declared to be in good circumstances, lined up straightly with the will of God, on the right track, praise-worthy. *Ashre* is never applied to God, only to people.

2. What circumstances are called *ashre* in the following passages? Is the word referring to the emotional state of the person, or to the God-given status of the person (or to both)? Is a person always happy when he is *ashre*?
 - › Gen. 30:9–13
 - › Deut. 33:29
 - › Ps. 1:1–2
 - › Ps. 32:1–2
 - › Ps. 94:12

“Blessed” in the New Testament

The New Testament also has two words translated as “blessed.”

Eulogeó

The Septuagint uses various forms of *εὐλογέω* (*eulogeó*) to translate the Hebrew *barak*, and it functions similarly. *Eulogeó* is used both for God blessing us (giving us His divine enablement, bestowing His gifts) and our blessing of God (praising and thanking Him). The English word “eulogy” is derived from this word, referring to “good speech,” the saying of good things about someone.

In Eph. 1:3, both meanings of the word are used. “Blessed (*eulogetos* — “praise, thanks”) be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed (*eulogesas* — given good things to) us in Christ with every spiritual blessing (*eulogia*) in the heavenly places.”

3. What divine gift or enablement is bestowed by God with the word “blessed” (*eulogetos*) in these passages?
 - › Luke 1:41–42
 - › Luke 2:34–35
 - › Matt. 25:31–34

Makarios

The other New Testament word translated as “blessed” is *μακάριος* (*makarios*). The Septuagint uses *makarios* to translate the Hebrew word *ashre*. *Makarios* is defined as “fortunate, privileged, happy because of circumstances.” As noted in the above introduction, in ancient Greek, *makarios* referred to people whose riches and power gave them freedom from the cares and worries of life. Having more than enough material wealth, the *makarios* (blessed, happy) could sit back and enjoy fullness of life.

But in the New Testament as a whole, *makarios* is more than just happiness resulting from positive, prosperous circumstances. It refers to the distinctive religious joy given to those who share in the reign of heaven, in which they know the joy of God’s forgiveness, life and salvation. One can have this blessedness even in the midst of difficulty or suffering.

The primary example of this is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus pronounces His children to be *makarios*. He declares them to be favored by God, in a positive, happy status before God. But the earthly circumstances in which this “distinctive religious joy” is given and received are not necessarily positive. Jesus declares *makarios* those who are “poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the persecuted,” etc. Contrary to the world’s view, Jesus does not declare “blessed” those who are already filled with good things. He declares “blessed” those who are spiritually empty, those who in repentance and faith in Jesus have left behind their reliance on the things, abilities or achievements of this world and are made able to receive the gifts of His kingdom. According to Jesus, the blessed are the empty!

4. Consider the following examples of people blessed by Jesus. How were they empty? How were they blessed by Jesus? How did they respond?
 - › Matt. 8:5–13
 - › Matt. 15:21–28
 - › Matt. 16:13–19
 - › Luke 1:46–49
5. On the other hand, some were so filled up with merits, abilities and achievements that they had no room for Jesus’ blessing.
 - › Luke 15:25–32
 - › Luke 18:18–30
 - › John 8:31–38

Blessed Are the Empty

“Blessed” usually means being filled up with good things and the happiness that results. However, as explained above, in Jesus’ kingdom, it is the empty who are blessed — the poor, the persecuted, the mourning.

On the necessity of this emptiness, Martin Franzmann wrote, “Only such as have become a vacuum for God to fill are capable of the life here described.” And, “Only a man who knows he has nothing and sees and seeks in God everything can be a recipient of the Kingdom.”⁴

In other words, when it comes to rightness with God, it is a great blessing to be empty of one’s own merit, ability

⁴ M.H. Franzmann, “Beggars Before God: The First Beatitude,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28, no. 12 (1947): 896.

or achievement. As Dr. Norman Nagel wrote, “Calvary is for you, from him, a gift. Blessed are those who are given to. They are ‘the poor in spirit’ of the first beatitude. . . . His giving to them is not blocked or hindered by what they have crammed together and would use for bargaining. ‘God gives into empty hands,’ says Augustine, not into hands full of what we would boast of before God. There is no room for the gifts to be given into. Sometimes, with drastic mercy, our Father empties our hands so there may be room for his gifts. Blessed are those who are given to by God.”⁵

Dr. Jeff Gibbs wrote in his commentary on Matthew, “The reign of heaven belongs to those who have no spiritual resources of their own, to the lost, to the sinners. Because of this, Jesus pronounces them ‘blessed’!”⁶

Dr. Nagel: “Sometimes, with drastic mercy, our Father empties our hands so there may be room for his gifts.” What

methods might God use to empty us in preparation for His gifts?

6. How is Paul being emptied in Rom. 7:15–25?
7. In light of the blessedness of emptiness, how does our view of weakness and suffering differ from the world’s? See 2 Cor. 12:7–10.

To summarize the uses of “blessed” in both Old and New Testaments:

- › “Blessed” (*barak/eulogetos*) refers to God’s divine enablement, His bestowal upon us of His gifts. The same word group can refer to our response of praise and thanksgiving to God.
- › “Blessed” (*ashre/makarios*) refers to the positive, happy circumstances of those declared to be in line with God’s will.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF "BLESSED"

In the confessions, to be blessed is to be empty of our own abilities and resources while receiving both temporal and spiritual gifts from God.

In the Large Catechism’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, to be blessed is to have earthly life and all that supports it as an undeserved gift from our Creator. “[God] gives us all these things so that we may sense and see in them his fatherly heart and his boundless love toward us. Thus our hearts will be warmed and kindled with gratitude to God and a desire to use all these blessings to his glory and praise.”⁷

In the explanation of the Second Article, we are blessed by virtue of the undeserved mercy of God, according to which Jesus has redeemed us from sin, death and the devil by His death and resurrection for us. Again, we contribute nothing but our emptiness to our redemption: “He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made

us free, and restored us to the Father’s favor and grace. He has taken us as his own, under his protection, in order that he may rule us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness.”⁸

In the explanation of the Third Article, to be blessed is to hear the Word and receive the Sacraments in the Christian church, through which the Holy Spirit gives and strengthens faith and forgives us our sins. Once again, this is not by our own doing. Large Catechism: “Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in Him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit.”⁹

5 Norman Nagel, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn,” *Concordia Pulpit Resources* 22, no. 4 (2012), sites.cph.org/cpr.

6 Jeffrey A. Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, *Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 241.

7 Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 413

8 *Ibid.*, 414.

9 *Ibid.*, 415.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF "BLESSED"

Consider this quotation from Luther's Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (LW 21):

“Christ opens His mouth here and says that something is necessary other than the possession of enough on earth; as if He were to say: ‘My dear disciples, when you come to preach among the people, you will find out that this is their teaching and belief: ‘Whoever is rich or powerful is completely blessed; on the other hand, whoever is poor and miserable is rejected and condemned before God.’ The Jews were firmly persuaded that if a man was successful, this was a sign that he had a gracious God, and vice versa. The reason for this was the fact that they had many great promises from God regarding the temporal, physical goods that He would grant to the pious. They counted upon these, in the opinion that if they had this, they were right with Him. ...

“At the outset, therefore, it was necessary for His sermon to overthrow this delusion and to tear it out of their hearts as one of the greatest obstacles to faith and a great support for the idol Mammon in their heart. Such a doctrine could have no other consequence than to make people greedy, so that everyone would be interested only in amassing plenty and in having a good time, without need or trouble. And everyone would have to conclude: ‘If that man is blessed who succeeds and has plenty, I must see to it that I do not fall behind.’

“This is still what the whole world believes today, especially the Turks, who draw their reliance and strength from it, coming to the conclusion that they could not have had so much success and victory if they had not been the people of God to whom He was gracious in preference to all others. Among us, too,

the whole papacy believes this. Their doctrine and life are founded only upon their having enough; and therefore they have assembled all the goods of the world, as everyone can see. In short, this is the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth. On it all men depend according to their flesh and blood, and they cannot regard anything else as blessedness. That is why He preaches a totally new sermon here for the Christians: If they are a failure, if they have to suffer poverty and do without riches, power, honor, and good days, they will still be blessed and have not a temporal reward, but a different, eternal one; they will have enough in the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰

1. According to the examples given by Luther, how are Law and Gospel sometimes confused by those who preach on the blessing of God?
2. In the above quotation, how is “blessed” defined according to a theology of glory? On the other hand, how is “blessed” defined according to the theology of the cross?
3. “Whoever is rich or powerful is completely blessed; on the other hand, whoever is poor and miserable is rejected and condemned before God.” In what ways is this message still preached today in popular media? In Christian churches? Why is it so tempting to preach this message? Why is it dangerous?
4. According to Luther, the Turks conclude that “they could not have had so much success and victory if they had not been the people of God to whom He was gracious in preference to all others.” In our day, what groups make similar conclusions?

¹⁰ Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21, commentary on Matt. 5:3.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In his commentary on Rom. 4:6–7 (LW 25), Luther wrote, “So also David pronounces, that is, affirms or declares, that there is no other blessedness of man except the blessedness of a man, by which he is blessed before God and by God, namely, the blessedness of that man alone to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works, that is, without the aid and cooperation of works, or to men who are undeserving. Blessed are those ... who do not think that they have no sin, or if they have it, do not believe that they are made righteous by their own works.”¹¹

What is Luther’s definition of blessedness? What obstacles keep us from knowing this blessedness?

2. How is infant Baptism an illustration of “Blessed are the empty”?

3. Consider Franzmann’s definition of an “empty” (therefore, blessed) pastor:

“The Christian preacher remains ever a beggar before God, and all pretentious tinsel of ‘pulpit oratory’ must be swept away by the beggarly simplicity of: ‘Lord, open *Thou* my lips that my mouth may show forth Thy praise.’ And the health and life of the Church depends upon her beggary, on her remaining conscious of the *sola gratia*, *sola fide*. For this beggary, though it leaves no room for personal pride and no room for personal glory, does leave full room for God and for His kingdom, for His sovereignly redemptive sway, and so leaves room for a glory that surpasseth.”¹²

SUMMARY

In the sermon referenced above, Dr. Norman Nagel wrote: “In the Gospel, this word blessed is always in relation to Jesus. It rings with gladness, as is pointed to by the translation that says, ‘Happy are those who know their need of God.’ But happiness is often something so fleeting or shallow, and here is something from our Lord, a lively, joyful

gift for all our living and all our dying. Not spoonfuls, not bucketfuls, but the ‘river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (Rev. 22:1). ‘And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace’ (John 1:16).”

¹¹ Hilton J. Oswald, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25: *Lectures on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), Libronix edition, commentary on Rom. 4:6–7.

¹² Franzmann, “Beggars Before God,” 898.